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## Memory for the Future. Managing History Within the Framework of Museums

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**Abstract:** The most important idea in this article is that managing a museum means as much as managing history. It is important to be aware that managing memory is indeed equal to managing the oblivion. Whatever will be overlooked within the collection (memory), will most probably be forgotten. Museums should remember that it is about making incessant choices as to which elements of heritage should be preserved and kept in appropriate conditions to be available for further generations. There is a lot of evidence of political, ethnic, social, economical and cultural exclusion. We need to emphasize that all the members of a given community foster its culture and history. Certainly, not all of them participate in its development equally – certain groups (e.g. political) or certain individuals (such as artists) become especially active in certain periods of time or are more influential than other groups in the development of a culture within a smaller community or the entire society. But museums should remember about all of them and should build their collections and displays having all the cultural objects and abjects (acc. to Yulia Kristeva). If a museum is to be the seat of memory and history it needs to include the memory and history of everyone.

**Key words:** memory & oblivion, abjects, museum, exclusion

Managing the museum means as much as managing history; it is a specific sort of management pursuing the needs of the future. The idea has been defined by ICOM (International Council of Museums), which by determining the essence and key tasks performed by these institutions, so valuable within the realm of culture, emphasizes that a museum “acquires, conserves, researches, communicates and exhibits the tangible and intangible heritage

of humanity and its environment.”<sup>1</sup> Developing a collection means to continuously answer questions about what is important to be remembered for future generations, what will (or could) have significance and what answers or meanings will be sought after by the ensuing museum frequenters. In other words, it is about making incessant choices as to which elements of heritage should be preserved and kept in appropriate conditions to be available for further generations. Maurice Halbwachs, known for developing the concept of collective memory, claims that in reference to contemporary facts “society does not have the sufficient perspective to classify them according to their meanings, so it collects and keeps them all, and only classifies them in order of their origin.”<sup>2</sup> It, however, seems that work in the museum somehow requires at least attempting to search for these meanings, on the basis of which one must decide whether to include the items in the collection or not. It is necessary to make these choices if we do not want museums to be labelled as mere warehouses for old objects. Although, certainly, both memory and history are an imminent part of the museum – the depositary of items from the passing and passed time.

At this point, we encounter a considerable problem within the framework of museum management. Items included in museum collections, which are made available to the public in specially prepared exhibitions, become a specific interpretation of history, existing this very moment in these social, cultural and political circumstances. Exhibitions present a specified, official version of history, and it would be difficult to search there for objects, which do not belong to a certain canon and depict a different view on history than that taught at schools.

Managing memory is indeed equal to managing the oblivion. Whatever will be overlooked within the collection (memory), will most probably be forgotten. We can agree with Marc Augé, who says: “Memories are akin to the shore, ‘oblivion’ to the sea that shapes it.”<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, there is also a reverse relation, and while remaining in the poetic rhetoric, we need to see that breakwaters and fortifications do not allow the waves of oblivion get far into the land of memories/recollections. Perhaps, the role of museums is also to somehow shape this so-called “shoreline” and through managing the collections set the boundaries for our memories.

In the collective as well as individual memory we can point to areas we would rather not remember about and which we treat with the mechanism of denial. Sometimes they belong to the dark times in history or threaten the

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<sup>1</sup> S. Waltoś, *Kodeks etyki ICOM dla muzeów*, Warszawa 2009, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> M. Halbwachs, *Společné ramy paměti*, foreword and translation by M. Król, Warszawa 2008, p. 197.

<sup>3</sup> M. Augé, *Formy zapomnienia*, transl. A. Turczyn, Kraków 2009, p. 28.

unity of a group. Some collective memories become the object of collective memory management and happen to be pushed away into the oceans of oblivion. We can enumerate many of such events, for instance in the latest Polish history: the after-war period saw the authorities eliminate certain historical facts from textbooks, schools or historical museums, because they were inconvenient. At the same time other facts were overly exposed, and became the only interpretation of the nation's history. We can also point to a separate trend, embodied by the underground opposition, who also remained silent about certain facts to expose others, serving the purpose of regaining independence and full sovereignty. Thus, we see that history often became a tool for politics, and the mission undertaken by the latter was to be realized by institutions depositing and distributing historical knowledge. And museums were included among them. The fact that it is not the best route for the museum operation is conveyed to us by Robert Traba, who standing up for history to increasingly become the space for dialogue emphasizes that "monuments as well as museums built in response to immediate needs of society or creating such opportunistic needs, quickly lose their social functions [...] and became a defunct part of urban landscape."<sup>4</sup>

The above mentioned two parallel ways of presenting history should be accompanied by other leads, which would complicate the matter even further. It is indeed important to remember that each member of society presents various views on reading history, which result from particular minority groups they belong to. We are talking here about ethnic, religious, social and other groups. History of Poland saw a great number of them, however, they are hardly represented in Polish museums. Jack Kugelmass speaks about Arthur Kurzweil's visit to Przemyśl. He intended to see an exhibition in order to find out more about the town his family originated from. It was much regrettable for him to see that memorabilia of a Jewish population, which counted over several thousand people, were comprised in two glass-cases representing a few objects of cult.<sup>5</sup> However, in spite of the understandable bitterness of the author, we need to see that in recent years Jewish inheritance have become quite visible in Polish museums, not mentioning the project of the Polish Jews History Museum in Warsaw that is currently being implemented. Nevertheless, many minority groups such as Roma or Germans are not very noticeable within the space of the Polish museum and therefore do not find an appropriate place in the collective memory of society. We should also take into account that sometimes the means in which we see and represent certain minority

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<sup>4</sup> R. Traba, *Historia – przestrzeń dialogu*, Warszawa 2006, p. 90.

<sup>5</sup> J. Kugelmass, "The Rites of the Tribe: American Jewish Tourism in Poland," in: I. Karp *et al.* (ed.), *Museums and Communities. The Politics of Public Culture*, Washington and London 1992, p. 397.

groups, which certainly refers to the ones I mentioned before, serve more to strengthen sensitivities and stereotypes than signify a real willingness to establish a dialogue, as well as open a space for mutual acceptance.

Jan Hudzik talks about forming a "dialogue bond" within which none of participants "attempts to hide anything, cast positive nor negative light on things," it, however, assumes "the necessity of mutual presence in the truth, i.e. the need and hope for agreement and mutual understanding of each other's arguments."<sup>6</sup> Such a model of coexistence in dialogue with the representatives of minorities and the excluded is possible to come to life in museums. Unfortunately, sometimes emotions associated with past history of contacts with groups that exist next to our own community (national, ethnic, religious, etc.) are so negative and so deeply rooted that performing an *epoché* or Husserl's bracketing seems virtually impossible. It does not, however, signify that the attempt is utopian and we should not strive to achieve the ideal goal. Museums, it seems, are an area particularly predestined to discovering values worth to be preserved. The space to search for such values also exists in the world of the people described as the "Others" or "Strangers", i.e. the minorities or representatives of other cultures. Multiculturalism of the contemporary world is a certain fact which does not need to be proven. On the other hand, the growing role of mass media as well as constant migrations make it more and more diversified and difficult to specify, especially that the global culture is increasingly undergoing a process of fragmentation. As a consequence, memory and its historical representations are becoming increasingly complicated and the concept on one presentable history turns out to be unacceptable. Equally unacceptable seems the concept stemming from the tradition of colonizing, which states that the objectivity of an European allows for an appropriate evaluation and explanation of a "strange" culture. The former is emphasized by Anna Nadolska-Styczyńska, who states that the collections of foreign cultures in museums portray their European history, "strictly related to the history of defeat, colonizing, expanse, destruction and exploitation of lands belonging to the extra-European representatives of our continent."<sup>7</sup> Historians as well put their hands on their hearts and admit that quite often the professional vision of history contributed to "distorting history" and constructing "national, ethnic or confessional myths."<sup>8</sup> We can say that mu-

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<sup>6</sup> J. Hudzik, "Pamięć i czas w kulturze, filozofii i pedagogice: zarys zagadnienia w ujęciu hermeneutycznym," *Ars Educandi* 2000, Vol. 2, p. 99.

<sup>7</sup> A. Nadolska-Styczyńska, *Pośród zabytków z odległych stron. Muzealnicy i polskie etnograficzne kolekcje pozaeuropejskie*, Toruń 2011, p. 92.

<sup>8</sup> Georg G. Iggers, "Użycia i nadużycia historii: o odpowiedzialności historyka w przeszłości i obecnie," in: E. Domańska (ed.), *Pamięć, etyka i historia. Anglo-amerykańska teoria historiografii lat dziewięćdziesiątych*, Poznań 2006, p. 113.

seums participated in this process as they were presenting collections based on ideologically marked history devoted to the so-called “rich repertoire of recipients.” The notion of portraying a foreign culture from “the inside” is virtually absent in the tradition of European museums. Memory is culturally dependent, however the contemporary multicultural world somehow forces this approach on the history of the “Others”, which at least attempts to take into account “Their history” and “Their memory.” May the European or elite point of view eschew to completely dominate the view on history and condemn to oblivion facts being in conflict with the conventional interpretation.

Museums could become places helping people open to the memory of the “Others,” to foreign memories. Researching the tradition and history of the “Others” influences our own stories as mentioned by Marc Augé: “meetings between communities [...] lead, as we know, to producing new stories, on both, community as well as individual levels, on the basis of which we start understanding (to the highest fear of purebred racists) that in the long run they will change the life and history of both: the colonizing and the colonized.”<sup>9</sup> Museums may undertake attempts to deconstruct histories of all the parties involved in this dialogue to achieve the complete picture of what they are striving to be.

Managers of cultural institutions should be aware that they co-create culture, and in their cultural activity should not evade finding space for the abovementioned “Others.” In his important text on museums in democracy, Dipesh Chakrabarty draws our attention to the fact that we need to broaden the horizons of museum experts to discover unexploited areas, especially that: “a democracy needs an informed public and public debates.”<sup>10</sup> We need to add that we speak about a debate or dialogue, where all the involved parties will be equally respected and their memory as well as history will be equally accepted within the paradigm of the discourse. Another important point mentioned by Chakrabarty is the fact that in late democracies cultures increasingly become egalitarian and democratized. Their fluidity is the result of information and values being exchanged among social classes that had so far been separated, thus divisions into the elite and mass cultures, as claims Bauman,<sup>11</sup> stop being valid anymore. This approach signifies that the times of authority and trendsetting performed by higher social classes has ended – boundaries became blurred. This statement cannot be ignored in the light of museums acting as depositaries of our memory.

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<sup>9</sup> M. Augé, *op. cit.*, p. 51.

<sup>10</sup> D. Chakrabarty, “Museums In Late Democracies,” *Humanities Research* 2002, Vol. IX, No. 1, p. 10.

<sup>11</sup> Z. Bauman, *Kultura w płynnej nowoczesności*, transl. E. Klekot, Warszawa 2011, pp. 17–31.

Maurice Halbwachs mentions that “for a long time aristocracy had been the basis for constructing collective memory. However, to be honest, their history is not the history of the nation.”<sup>12</sup> Still, it was this social class that enabled the creation of collections, which were then transformed into public museums. Aristocracy, as the elite of the elite, set the trend of what was to be remembered and admired, as well as instructing on beauty standards. These criteria were applied in art, historical, biographical as well as ethnographical museums, which were developed by higher classes and it was their perspective or perception of the non-elite cultures that was respected in this domain. Perhaps, among all the museums that collect testimonies of culture, we can point to archeological museums as being the most “democratic,” where differences between wealth, origin or social position of the excavated objects’ owners become blurred and unimportant. On the level of mere objects collection we can state that items excavated from the earth become of equal class – and in accordance with their objectives – archeological museums’ warehouses accept anything excavated by researchers. However, expositions will rather display tombs of the rich, and show-cases holding artefacts of the most flamboyant character, i.e. the ones, as we can assume, which belonged to the social elite. Taking into account the abovementioned facts we can state that museums still remember the history of the higher class, although its history is not the history of the nation. Neither is it the history of the entire continent, supranational entities or cultures distant in time and space.

Despite democratization of the world, the division of the social classes is still quite distinguishable. Although one may notice that the division runs along different lines than before, in the global perspective we can still recognize elite groups as well as these who could never pretend to be in the higher social class. Perhaps it would be difficult to expect any changes in this respect in the nearest future. It is however worth to remember that the present-day elites are not only the descendants of the past high society and determinants of status are far more complicated than the inheritance of noble titles. Quite often the indicator of class affinity is not only social origin, which was a rule in the past, but the wealth at one’s disposal. In a different place,<sup>13</sup> Bauman writes about this as well, he, however pays attention to the separation of the rich north and poor south, or distinguishes the “ramblers” wandering the world, somehow forced to do it or those higher in hierarchy – the “tourists,” who move around the world out of their own choice. We can also distinguish the “new elites,” and not only on the global scale. In our own country the role of politicians, celebrities and journalists is continuously increasing, and most frequently it is them who decide about the form and condition of cul-

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<sup>12</sup> M. Halbwachs, *op. cit.*, p. 337.

<sup>13</sup> Z. Bauman, *op. cit.*

ture in Poland. Calls from artists and authority figures remain unanswered, and we still wait to see some spectacular actions undertaken by the social and non-governmental entities. Old structures have been steamrolled by the notion of egalitarianism and ever since the individual memory of a person is important.

Once again we need to emphasize that all the members of a given community foster its culture and history. Certainly, not all of them participate in its development equally – certain groups (e.g. political) or certain individuals (such as artists) become especially active in certain periods of time or are more influential than other groups in the development of a culture within a smaller community or the entire society. There, however, always exists some sort of potential reference or relation to all the possible groups within the society, independent of their position in social hierarchy. Individual groups operate within the system of culture, and all that is produced by them constitutes its tissue. Culture consists of and is co-created by all the objectified actions of all the members in a given society. Sometimes groups remaining in opposition to one another undertake special actions in the name of this opposition, at other times we can observe imitation or other forms of expansion. Interactions among various groups – official as well as these, which are kept secret and thus somehow emerge *au rebours* – form the shape and quality of this specific fabric of life and human being presence in the entire ecosystem. To feel entirely present within the culture, we need to understand that we are all inextricably entangled and that all human actions meet the eye of the society this or another way. Nothing is separate, and it all results in developing social connections and meanings we are intertwined within. It refers to contemporary, past as well as future events. The entire past contributes to our development as well as we contribute to building the future: “therefore we need not only look ahead, but also look back; or rather see this enormous heritage that we carry within ourselves, but which carries us as well.”<sup>14</sup> This heritage, deposited in museums, should provide a reservoir of knowledge about ourselves, who carried by history at the same time contribute to its form and shape. We act as messengers, transferring content towards history. Certain people are such messengers, but in a special way, certain institutions are more predestined than others to perform such tasks. In this realm, museums play an exceptional role as the content they present is reinforced by tangible artefacts. Heritage that influences our existence is understood here as a whole, without any discrimination into tangible or intangible parts, without separating objects or ideas into these originating in the elite world and those coming from the world of the masses. History, as well as the earth inside

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<sup>14</sup> A. Gołubiew, *Unoszeni historii*, Kraków 1971, p. 5.

which the archeological monuments lie, make the artefacts of the past equal in status, and museums can increasingly become the depositaries and distributors of values of the entire past and not only some pieces of it.

We could therefore put forward a postulate which would help us to understand men, and use a museum as a means of telling their story in the most holistic and at the same time humane way. Ultimately, the time has come to expand museum collections as well as exhibitions, and include abjects in their domains. An abject is a concept within the psychological and philosophical field developed by Julia Kristeva, and transplanted into the field of history by Ewa Domańska. "Abject is this part of the subject that is opposed by the superego, which stands in opposition to *Me*; it is this part of the *Other* that was rejected by the subject in order to establish itself"<sup>15</sup> – informs Domańska while elaborating on Kristeva's concept within the framework of individual personality. The simultaneous presence of such ambivalent constituents as the evident and visible parts accompanied by the rejected ones, the ones pushed away into the taboo zone, is an indispensable condition for an individual subject to exist. By this means it is perceived as a system within which the co-forming and mutually complementing features are equally significant for the image of the subject to be complete. The possibility to extrapolate this way of thinking into historiography is perceived by the author through the idea of "domesticating the Other," which means that all those who were excluded or denied in traditional history or official historical discourse are now to be included in it (e.g. indigenes, women, cripples, children, animals, things).

We must, however, remember here the warnings issued by Robert Traba who, elaborating on the subject of the program for the Museum of Polish History, sees that architects of historical politics "have created a flagship of their *affirmative* approach (as opposed to the past *critical* one) to the past. It is a political tactic, dispensing propaganda and having nothing to do with the modern idea of historic narration. However, social perception of this political game can divide our society into *good* and *bad* representatives of the nation."<sup>16</sup> It can also trigger an exclusively *affirmative* approach towards Polish character and identity in the present, as well as future times. History, however, has taught us lessons that a solely *affirmative* approach to one's nation, and glorification of its virtues, either real or imagined ones, lead to nationalism characterized by its massive destructive force. This division into *good* and *bad* citizens of Poland also leads to exclusions and internal phobias within the nation.

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<sup>15</sup> E. Domańska, *Historie niekonwencjonalne*, Poznań 2006, p. 96.

<sup>16</sup> Traba R., *Historia – przestrzeń dialogu*, Warszawa 2006, p. 107.



A good example of abovementioned threats is presented in our perception of various subculture groups, which we can call the internal "Others." They include the hip-hop listeners and politicians, cyclists and stamp collectors, as well as football fans and listeners of particular radio stations. We do not need to prove that such divisions exist as they are present in our daily life, and are visible to anyone without special research apparatus. However, independently of the evaluation we give and which sometimes seems natural, it is worth to emphasize that each member of each of these groups contributes to the "culture of Poland," which will, with passing time, become the "history of Poland," and as such ought to be present in the collective memory as well as in museums. This way of thinking should be expanded into local communities, including their objects and abjects, with accepted as well as rejected groups, with outstanding individuals and the less outstanding rest. If a museum is to be the seat of memory and history it needs to include the memory and history of everyone.

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